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### Deposited in DRO:

08 September 2015

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

O'Neill, Michael (2014) 'Materials for imagination' : Shelleyan traces in Felicia Hemans's poetry after 1822.', *Women's writing*, 21 (1). pp. 74-90.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2014.881064>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Women's Writing* on 07/04/2014, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09699082.2014.881064>.

### Additional information:

Special Issue: Beyond Domesticity: Felicia Hemans in the Wider World; Guest Editors: Kate Singer and Nanora Sweet

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**Michael O'Neill**

**“MATERIALS FOR IMAGINATION”: SHELLEYAN TRACES IN FELICIA HEMANS’S  
POETRY AFTER 1822**

*This essay takes its title from a phrase used by Maria Jewsbury in a review-article of 1831, which discusses Hemans’s mid-career change towards a more expressive and imaginative poetry. The essay illustrates how traces of Shelley’s writings pervade the poetry of the 1820s and afterwards, and, without slighting the intertextual relations that Hemans’s work has with the poetry of Byron and Wordsworth, it argues for a fuller sense of the uses to which Hemans puts Shelley’s poetry. It contends that Hemans has a productive awareness of Shelley’s capacity for self-conflict, and that she is able to infuse Shelleyan notes into her work in ways that help us account for her poetry’s rich mingling of moods and effects.*

The youthful Shelley admired the 1808 *Poems* of Felicia Dorothea Browne, as she then was. Thomas Medwin, who had shown him the volume, describes Shelley's reaction: "with a prophetic spirit he foresaw the coming greatness of that genius, which under the name of Hemans afterwards electrified the world".<sup>1</sup> According to Henry Fothergill Chorley, Hemans was, for her part, by 1828, "long since ... won from her early disinclination to enjoy or even admit any of Shelley's dreamy, but most inspired poems, by the elevation of thought they display, even at their wildest, and the exquisite charms of their imagery and versification. Her mind was as certainly accessible by the former, as her fancy and her ear were open to the enchantment of the latter: one of the lyrics she loved best, was his 'Ode to the West Wind'."<sup>2</sup>

Part, no doubt, of the process by which Hemans "was won from her early disinclination" was the attempted un-besmiching of Shelley's reputation at work in Mary Shelley's 1824 edition of *Posthumous Poems*. This volume does not so much de-politicize Shelley as present a complex poet able to excel in different modes and above all to make self-conflict central to his work, as occurs in manifest or more covert ways in poems such as *Julian and Maddalo*, *The Witch of Atlas*, and *The Triumph of Life*, all appearing in print for the first time. Again, lyrics such as "Stanzas Written in Dejection – December, 1818, near Naples", a poem admired by Hemans (in a letter of 1831) as "quite a union of music and picture in poetry", exhibit the suffering lyric self behind the radical tilter against orthodoxy. That poem points up, too, the link between the suffering lyric self and the capacity to respond to natural beauty in a poetry of inventive sound-effects, enterprising verse-form (the poem is composed in modified Spenserian stanzas, the first eight lines in tetrameters, the ninth an alexandrine), and image (mood is conveyed through sensitive notation of the external scene). Hemans's recollection of lines from the poem in this letter of 3 April 1831 is intent on enhancing its

subjective nature and metapoetic awareness: where Shelley writes, “and a tone / Arises from its measured motion” (16-17), Hemans has, “and I hear / The music of its measured motion”.<sup>3</sup>

Hemans’s response to Shelley after his death in July 1822, this essay’s subject, is at once pervasive and almost secret. Her inveterate reworking of Shelley’s tropes and phrases seeks to acknowledge yet critique, to allow for “enchantment” but to chasten and subdue. Shelley turns up in surprising places and ways. In “Woman and Fame”, published in 1829 in *The Amulet, or Christian and Literary Remembrancer*, she orchestrates enthralled, corrective references to “Mont Blanc” and *Epipsychidion*: “Thou hast a voice, whose thrilling tone / Can bid each life-pulse beat” (13-14). In “Mont Blanc”, Shelley asserts: “Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe” (80-1). Hemans’s work appears in a publication whose subtitle is at odds with Shelleyan heterodoxy, even as she mimics his note of authoritative assertion. In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley refers to “looks, which dart / With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart” (562-3). Hemans redefines Shelleyan eroticism as the lure of duplicitous reputation. As elsewhere, her poetry’s allusive, echoic resonances mingle admiration for and distancing from a Shelleyan original.

In discussing Hemans’s response to Shelley, it is difficult not to triangulate that response, at least briefly, with her attitude to Byron. “She wrote in his voice, quoted him in letters, sounded his phrases in his poems, summoned his verse for epigraphs”. Susan Wolfson captures well the empathy that Hemans felt for Byron, one making possible “oppositional” and “canny” readings.<sup>4</sup> As the same critic’s annotations to her edition of Hemans’s writings bring out, Hemans was also acutely aware of Shelley, sometimes seeing him as an alternative to Byron as well as ally. Hemans is sensitive to the different accents of longing in the two poets: bitterly frustrated in Byron, yearningly unrealized in Shelley. An interplay between these different, allied accents, adapted to Hemans’s own capacity for dramatic monologue, takes place in *The Forest Sanctuary*, part second, when the hero, fleeing Spain, looks at his

wife Leonor, who loves him but regards his spiritual views as heretical. For the speaker, it is as though Leonor's melancholy were explicable in terms other than those that turn out to be true (that she is dying):

I told my heart 'twas but the exile's woe  
Which press'd on that sweet bosom; -- I deceiv'd  
My heart but half:--a whisper faint and low,  
Haunting it ever, and at times believ'd,  
Spoke of some deeper cause. How oft we seem  
Like those that dream, and *know* the while they dream,  
Midst the soft falls of airy voices griev'd,  
And troubled, while bright phantoms round them play,  
By a dim sense that all will float and fade away! (II. xxxvi. 316-24)

This idiom tempers and transmutes Byronic and Shelleyan rhetorics of feeling. Indeed, the condition of being "Midst the soft falls of airy voices griev'd" seems almost reflexive; it evokes the way in which Hemans, a poet aware of and alert to "voice", as Diego Saglia has brought out, positions herself in relation to Shelley.<sup>5</sup> Often Hemans is "griev'd" amidst the enchanting "wandering voices" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III. iii. 57) which bring intimations of radical hope in Shelley's work; "griev'd", in part, because of her abiding concern with mortality as an absolute check to any secularized vision of happiness. For his part, Byron had made "the exile's woe" his special territory; he is, too, a poet who responds to the lure of "bright phantoms", as in the stanza from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (IV. v) which Hemans quotes as the epigraph to "The Beings of the Mind". In that stanza, Byron says of such "beings" that they "multiply in us a brighter ray / And more beloved existence"

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. v).<sup>6</sup> In “The Beings of the Mind” the idea of the mind as housing “children of the soul” associates itself with the peril always attendant on the trope of domestic security in her work; the declension of Byron’s “beings of the mind” into “bright phantoms” in *The Forest Sanctuary* hands them over to an imagining of loss.<sup>7</sup>

That sense of loss communicates through the rhyme’s passage from “play” to “fade away”, as though to “play” imaginatively were to “fade away”. Hemans’s form in *The Forest Sanctuary*, “a variation of the Spenserian stanza (*ababccbdd* instead of *ababbcbcc*)”, as Wolfson notes, adapts itself to what in her prefatory note the poet calls the “mental conflict, as well as outward sufferings” (269) of the speaker.<sup>8</sup> Employing an extra rhyme (four rather than the usual three), Hemans allows for a mid-stanza redirection, and here her prompter seems Shelley, whose interest in nuanced psychological states is at work in the evocation of semi-conscious awareness: “I deceiv’d / My heart but half”, for example, recalls the soliloquizing Orsino in *The Cenci*, offered by Beatrice an unflattering image of himself, “To which I grow half reconciled” (II. ii. 118).<sup>9</sup> Again, it evokes comments by the same figure about his operations of desire: “thus unprofitably / I clasp the phantom of unfelt delights / Till weak imagination half possesses / The self-created shadow” (II. ii. 140-3).

Those last lines suggest creative affinities and differences between Hemans and one of her Romantic male contemporaries, a contemporary who by the mid-1820s, had, by the accident of premature death, turned into a precursor. My emphasis is on the stealthy, feline links between Hemans’s work and Shelley’s; affinity, influence and intertextuality compose an intricate net. “How oft we seem / Like those that dream, and *know* the while they dream” might, for instance, bring to mind the Shelley for whom “all things seem, / And we the shadows of the dream” (Conclusion, 11-12) in *The Sensitive Plant*; it has caught, more specifically, the Shelleyan interest in the way in which dream seems a mode of liminal trespass, to have a vivifying or morbid intensity that threatens the validity of waking

consciousness, as when Laon discerns “A dim and feeble joy, whose glimpses oft / Were quenched in a relapse of wildering dreams” (*Laon and Cythna*, III. xxxiii. 289-90).<sup>10</sup> But Hemans has given an individualizing twist to the difficult partnership between seeming and dreaming. Her speaker appeals to the idea of knowledge amidst “dream”, a knowledge less ratiocinative than made up of intimation and foreboding, that state which in “The Spirit’s Mysteries” she calls “the strange inborn sense of coming ill”: a characteristic locution that turns a nominal construction into a compounded “sense”.<sup>11</sup>

Often this sense seems at work in her responses, explicit and oblique, to the figure of Shelley, who surely, as Fiona Stafford has recently suggested, is the hidden addressee of “The Lost Pleiad”.<sup>12</sup> As in some Dantescan love-poem, Byron acts as the screen figure in this lyric, which appears to be directed to him, given the title with its allusion to a famous stanza (xiv) from *Beppo*. Wolfson discovers “sly wit” and subversive intent (at Byron’s expense), reading the poem as asserting that “England’s new constellation of poets can survive the loss of its most famous exile”.<sup>13</sup> Yet if “The Lost Pleiad” evokes the Byron who was a “forgotten celebrity in 1823”, it reads, too, as a meditation on Shelley.<sup>14</sup> The poem seems less to turn the tables on Byron than to find an answerable sublimity for the fate of the “vanish’d” Shelley; poetry – the poem bears witness – can survive the loss of a poet who established himself in *Adonais* as the greatest elegist since Milton, but the survival seems at once slightly benumbed and astonished by its own calm. *Adonais* comes to mind with particular force in the final stanza:

Why, who shall talk of thrones, of sceptres riven?—

Bow’d be our hearts to think on what *we* are,

When from its height afar,

A world sinks thus -- and yon majestic heaven

Shines not the less for that one vanish'd star! (21-5)

In the final stanza of *Adonais*, Shelley is “borne darkly, fearfully, afar; / Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven, / The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are” (492-5). To think on “what *we* are” in a stanza that recalls the rhymes of the final stanza of *Adonais* seems less to subvert the arrogant male poet than to express a tangle of interrelated feelings about the loss of “that one vanish'd star”. Hemans’s poem is sumptuously musical, yet self-aware, attentive, sorrowful, courageous, equal to the challenge presented by “glory from the heavens departed”. The “majestic heaven”, rhyming with “sceptres riven”, recalls a second set of rhymes in the final stanza of *Adonais*, where the “inmost veil of Heaven” represents the goal of a quest in which “The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!” (491). But whereas those “riven” skies represent the intensity of Shelley’s drive towards “the inmost veil of Heaven”, Hemans’s poem removes quest from the picture. In her poem, earth is a place of “sceptres riven”, while the sky, discreetly allegorical locale of canonicity and artistic immortality, is a “majestic heaven”, seemingly untouched by human sorrows.<sup>15</sup>

Different editors have noted that Hemans substituted “Bow’d be our hearts” for “It is too sad”, the reading in the poem’s initial magazine publication (in the *New Monthly Magazine*, 8 December 1823), the idea of bowed hearts working at one remove from the more hackneyed notion of bowed heads.<sup>16</sup> The bowing of hearts mixes recognition of comparative insignificance with the self-reverence frequently advocated by Shelley (as in the last line of “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”). If the poem ends, almost on a note of deferential tribute, it manipulates distance with skill, speaking of an objectified ‘star’, not of the more intimate “thou” or “thee” addressed in previous stanzas (5, 8, 15, 16, 19) and placing a counteracting stress on the fact that “yon majestic heaven / Shines not the less”.



In a late, unfinished lyric “The Zucca”, Shelley yearns after “Thou, whom seen no where, I feel everywhere”.<sup>17</sup> Hemans uses the same device of vocative address at the close of her first stanza – “Thou, that no more art seen of mortal eye” (5) – but her sentence construction is passive, where Shelley’s is active; indeed, she confers action on the “starry myriads” (11) that continue to “rise” and “have not mourned for thee” (15). Shelley’s addressee in “The Zucca” is, typically, the “Dim object of my soul’s idolatry”, “idolatry” rhyming with “thee” in a gesture of self-knowledge. Hemans, too, subjects “idolatry” to question. But if Shelley suggests the dangers of aesthetic infatuation, Hemans implies the ethical peril of a “wild and passionate idolatry” (her epigraph to “Juana”), even as she invites a sympathetic reading of Shelleyan “idolatry” as itself typifying “generous error” (Preface to *Alastor*, 92). “The Lost Pleiad” benefits from its withheld decorum, its restraint. It is the impression, however, that there may be powerful feelings of regret for the “thou” that are deliberately not being expressed which explains the poem’s affective potency.

The poem defies paraphrase; it marks the emergence of what might be called the fully mature Hemans. More remains to be written about the different phases of Hemans’s precocious and productive career.<sup>18</sup> But Maria Jewsbury offers a valuable point of departure:

Within the time specified [c. 1815-1831], Mrs. Hemans has differed as materially from herself as from any other writer; and not in minor points merely, but in very essential ones. Up to the publication of the “Siege of Valencia,” her poetry was correct, classical, and highly polished – but it wanted warmth; it partook more of the nature of statuary than of painting. She fettered her mind with facts and authorities, and drew upon her memory when she should have relied upon her imagination ... But now this is no longer the case. The sun of feeling has risen upon her song – noon has followed morning – the Promethean touch has been given to the statue – the Memnon yields its music. She writes from and to the heart, putting her

memory to its fitting use -- that of supplying materials for imagination to fashion and build with.

Jewsbury singles out, in particular (though not without misgivings), the later poetry's "bias toward the supernatural of thought" and comments that

Most of her later poems breathe of midnight fancies and lone questionings -- of a spirit that muses much and mournfully on the grave, not as forever shrouding beloved objects from the living, but as a shrine where high unearthly oracles may be won; and all the magnificence of this universal frame, the stars, the mountains, the deep forest, and the ever-sounding sea, are made ministrants to this form of imagination.<sup>19</sup>

The analysis does much to capture a new note in Hemans's work, and Jewsbury's language borrows liberally from Shelley's *Alastor* (a key text for Hemans).<sup>20</sup> Jewsbury's "lone questionings" recall Shelley's post-Wordsworthian "obstinate questionings" (26), involving "some lone ghost" (27); her "universal frame" brings the Poet's now dead, once "wondrous frame" (665) to mind; her "magnificence" remembers the reference in Shelley's preface to "The magnificence and beauty of the external world" (92). Jewsbury senses that Hemans operates with a post-Shelleyan dialectic between "external world" and the "high thoughts" (107) that, in different ways, propel the Poet of *Alastor*. Though she does not mention Shelley, her searching praise is interspersed by a gendered digression on the futility of ignoring "the difference between the poetry of men and women", which segues into a sense that if "we discover that power is the element of man's genius" and "beauty that of woman's", "occasionally we reciprocate their respective influence, by discerning the beauty of power, and feeling the power of beauty".<sup>21</sup>

Commenting on this elegantly turned passage, Gary Kelly remarks shrewdly that Jewsbury “can accept the kind of gender distinction advanced by Jeffrey, while denying that this distinction is hierarchical, and arguing that the difference can be dialectical”.<sup>22</sup> Hemans herself is often artfully dialectical in her dealings with Shelley. Shelley’s self-presentation subverts masculine stereotypes; he is unafraid to feminize the self, admit weakness, express a longing for the “sister” of his soul in *Epipsychidion* in a way that threatens the notion of the self-contained male self: so, he addresses Emily thus: “Ah me! / I am not thine: I am a part of thee” (51-2).<sup>23</sup> In “A Spirit’s Return”, Hemans, as Wolfson observes, “often deploys Shelleyan diction and imagery” in a poem that makes Shelleyan tropes into a medium for Hemansesque longing.<sup>24</sup> Shelley in *Epipsychidion* asks Emily that she would “blot from this sad song / All of its much mortality and wrong” (35-6), before going on to posit pre-existent “fields of immortality” (133) where his “spirit should at first have worshipped thine” (134). His tone is rhapsodic but composed, almost witty in its glance at a Wordsworthian Platonism, imagining an alternative, probably pre-existent state. Hemans’s speaker uses similar diction as she longs “for gifts more high! / For a seer’s glance to rend mortality” (57-8). In one sense, this longing goes a step further than Shelley, wishing to transcend rather than erase the traces of “mortality” and giving “mortality” its full, existential significance. Hemans finishes on a note that is assertively confident, not passionately aware of imminent collapse, as is the case in Shelley as his “wingèd words” (588) crash and burn. For Hemans, “that glimpse of joy divine, / Proved thee for ever and for ever mine” (261-2).

Hemans writes in couplets in “A Spirit’s Return”, as does Shelley in *Epipsychidion*, but hers bind whereas his threatens always to break: Shelley’s final movement is away from the circles he seems intent on shaping into being; when he uses the same rhyme as that with which Hemans’s poem concludes, it is at the sophisticated service of poetic deferral. In his Dantescan envoi, he commands his “Weak Verses” (592) to “kneel at your Sovereign’s feet”

(Love's) and ask "What wouldest thou with us and ours and thine?" (592, 594), and go on to sing that "Love's very pain is sweet, / But its reward is in the world divine / Which, if not here, it builds beyond the grave" (596-8). Hemans claims to have heard a voice from "beyond the grave"; Shelley offers such a voice as a poetic fiction. Hemans literalizes, with exalted, uncanny intensity, a Shelleyan metaphor. Hemans (or her speaker) asks the spirit and affirms, with the nimbly enjambed skill typical of her later poetry, "Dost thou not rejoice, / When the spring sends forth an awakening voice, / Through the young woods? -- Thou dost!" (237-9). Shelley, for all his uses of "voice" in *Epipsychidion*, skips the full-bodied assurance that the rhyme of "voice" and "rejoice" suggests; Hemans brings him out of the sceptical shadows that surround his daring intuitions, even as her voice is interrogative as well as indicative. Hemans individuates religious experience; Shelley translates it into a series of analogues for a new version of the relations between men and women, the renovated political structures intimated by the descent of the spirit-like "spring" of Asia's speech at the start of act 2 of *Prometheus Unbound* (see especially 1-12). For Hemans, Spring's "awakening voice" traverses boundaries between the living and the dead, serving as an earnest of spiritual hope; for Shelley, when "a fountain" makes "an awakening sound" (III. iii. 13,14) in a cave where Prometheus and Asia dwell, the awakening serves as a portal onto a redeemed universe. Hemans draws Shelley into her own spiritualizing dialogue and debate. The resulting interaction allows for considerable difference – Hemans is continually fending off the threat of Shelleyan heterodoxy – but also accommodates fellow-understanding, which enables the marginally younger poet to refine her own tonalities. George Gilfillan's 1847 sibling fantasy about the two poets, albeit sentimentalized, is, in its own mid-Victorian manner, compelling:

In many points, Mrs. Hemans reminds us of a poet [...] whom she passionately admired, namely, Shelley. Like him, dropping fragile, a reed shaken by the wind, a

mighty wind, in sooth, too powerful for the tremulous reed on which it discoursed its music; like him, the victim of exquisite nervous organization; like him, verse flowed for and from her, and the sweet sound often overpowered the meaning, kissing it, as it were, to death ... Mrs. Hemans, indeed, was not like Shelley, a vates; she has never reached his heights, nor sounded his depths, yet they are, to our thought, so strikingly alike, as to seem brother and sister, in one beautiful, but delicate and dying family.<sup>25</sup>

Gilfillan notes the lack in Hemans of Shelley's "faithless despondency", writing that "Her spirit was cheered by faith".<sup>26</sup> But Hemans's interest in prophecy, the capacity for vatic insight, is underplayed here; it frequently occurs in contexts where "faith" wrestles with a quasi-Shelleyan sense that "we press upon the brink / Haply of viewless worlds, and know it not", as "The Spirit's Mysteries" has it.<sup>27</sup> Hemans's doubt is attendant upon commitment to belief in our "immortal being", as the same poem has it, though a commitment that is consciously driven by will and desire: "So let us deem", she comments in this poem, consciously pointing up the will to believe – here, that the spirit's mysteries serve as earnest of immortality. Shelley, in poems such as "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", enacts the struggle between scepticism and self-generated belief: Hemans depends on spectatorial comment. Shelley relies on an image's possible ambivalence, intellectual beauty, say, providing "human thought" with "nourishment / Like darkness to a dying flame" (44-5); Hemans holds image and comment in a fine equilibrium in "The Spirit's Mysteries", as though, in the act of sounding Shelley's depths, she is refusing to be drawn into the rushing vortex of his doubled suggestions. This is less dogmatic timidity than a means of staging her poetry's tensions.

Her dealings with Shelley, though intertextually evident, have, as noted above, a clandestine element. Shelley is a rare source, for example, of epigraphs, Hemans's usual way of cueing influences, because of his alleged "follies and impieties". These are the words of

Blackwood, responding to Hemans's 1828 request that a motto from Shelley be retained for her poem "The Broken Lute", though she asks that his "name" should be "omitted" on account of friends who "objected much to my having taken a motto from Shelley". But Blackwood was able to assure Hemans that Shelley "was a true poet".<sup>28</sup> The very concept of the "true poet" is, indeed, at stake in consideration of Hemans's response to Shelley.<sup>29</sup>

Hemans suggests the focus of her vocation as a poet and her interest in Shelley when she quotes Maddalo's line, "They learn in suffering what they teach in song" (546), as the epigraph to "The Diver". What validates "suffering" and "song", in Hemans's appropriation of these terms, is existential and verbal uniqueness. Isobel Armstrong finds that Hemans replaces Shelley's alleged "dialectic of violence and mockery" with "a *social* dyad of impassioned intersubjective feeling".<sup>30</sup> Yet Shelley often comes to Hemans's mind as a fraught ally when "intersubjectivity", in the form of intertextual responsiveness, points up poetic aloneness. At the end of "The Graves of a Household", for example, Hemans turns from celebratory lament to something disruptively transgressive:

They that with smiles lit up the hall,  
And cheer'd with song the hearth, --  
Alas, for love! if *thou* wert all,  
And naught beyond, oh, earth! (27-30)

The address to the italicized "thou" seizes on and makes capital out of Shelley's question at the end of "Mont Blanc" – "And what wert thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-4). In both works, the possibility of "vacancy" surfaces: Shelley expresses his sense that what seems epiphanic from one perspective might, from another, appear emptied of significance; Hemans

stages a seeming breakdown of lyric fluency as she articulates the fear that the “earth” might be “all, / And naught beyond”.<sup>31</sup> This is Hemans at her most lyrically multi-vocal, not so much riven as alert to contradiction: the celebrant of family recognizes the inevitability of familial disintegration in the face of death; the believer in some final heavenly happiness expresses her recognition that such envisaged happiness may be a cheat.

In the poem, Hemans subjects to keen inspection a rhyme (between “hearth” and earth”) which Shelley uses in support of hope towards the close of “Ode to the West Wind”. There, Shelley commands the wind to “Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! / Be through my lips to unawakened earth // The trumpet of a prophecy!” (66-9). The “hearth” of poetic inspiration is only “unextinguished”; it will give rise to “Ashes” as well as “sparks”, but Shelley hopes that, though as yet “unawakened”, “earth” will hear, as a result of his intervention, “The trumpet of a prophecy!” The poem darts from figure to figure in the ardour of its half-desperate longing. As often in Shelley’s work, as Walter Bagehot memorably put it, “In the wildest of ecstasies his self-anatomising intellect is equal to itself”, able, here, to recognize that the wind’s “scattering” will involve dispersal as well as dissemination, able, too, to indicate that the poem’s main warrant for its strain of affirmation is its own metaphor-dependent eloquence.<sup>32</sup> Whereas “earth” will, for Shelley, be the beneficiary of what is scattered from the “hearth”, Hemans breaks the link promised by the rhyme. Instead, equally able to retain intellectual control amidst passionate feeling, she posits “earth” as both the preserver and destroyer of the “hearth”, turned, in her hands from a locus of creativity to an image of desired familial stability.

In “The Diver” Hemans addresses an alter ego of the explorative and suffering poet, as is made explicit from the eighth quatrain on, and a version of the Romantic quester who is described in terms that seem deliberately to echo Shelley’s poetry. At the same time, Hemans’s poem compacts the Shelleyan into its own tightly constructed formal design. The

male poet's sonorities find themselves encased in Hemans's jewel-box stanzas. The Poet of *Alastor* speaks of the "measureless ocean" (509) and "oozy caverns" (510) as beyond understanding; Hemans invokes the diver as "Thou searcher of ocean's caves!" (4), where the rhythmical lilt created by an extra syllable is buoyantly at odds with the mood of sadness. Indeed, the poem's tonal colouring blends sympathy with an air of anguished distance. In the following stanzas, Hemans summarizes the plot of *Alastor*:

A wild and weary life is thine;  
 A wasting task and lone,  
 Though treasure-grotes for thee may shine,  
 To all besides unknown!

A weary life! but a swift decay  
 Soon, soon shall set thee free;  
 Thou'rt passing fast from thy toils away,  
 Thou wrestler with the sea! (13-20)

The first stanza here recalls the way in which, in the devastating aftermath of the vision of the "veiled maid" (*Alastor* 151), the Poet is depicted: "wildly he wandered on, / Day after day, a weary waste of hours" (244-5); his "lone" state dominates the poem, yet, cross-gendering, Hemans brings Shelley's Poet into connection with Wordsworth's Lucy who, in "Song: 'She dwelt among th'untrodden ways'", "*liv'd unknown*" (9).<sup>33</sup> Characteristically a Shelleyan energy of hopeless hope is redefined, twinned with a suffering passivity. The Poet's death in *Alastor* stems from the "decaying flame" (247) of a life that consumes itself for want of



satisfactory emotional nutriment. The “swift decay” experienced by Hemans’s diver is the source of freedom. Hemans turns to death as to a finality that silences complaint.

And yet the rest of her poem complicates acceptance of suffering. As the poem spells out the comparison between “the wrestler with sea” and those “Who win for earth the gems of thoughts” (31), Hemans mingles pride and pain, suggesting “the price of bitter tears, / Paid for the lonely power” (41-2). Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*, a revisiting of *Alastor* and revitalization of its perished hopes, serves as a point of departure. Shelley wishes to plumb, in his rhapsodic address to Emily, “The fountains of our deepest life” and for them to “be / Confused in passion’s golden purity” (570-1), where “Confused” means “fused together.”<sup>34</sup> Alluding to Shelley’s impassioned project, Hemans writes thus of her intrepid explorers: “Down to the gulfs of the soul they go, / Where the passion-fountains burn” (33-4). She seizes on Shelley’s phrasing, condenses and compacts it (one notices the hybrid formation of “passion-fountains”), almost, *pace* Armstrong, does violence to it, turning prolonged lyric excursus into packed formulation. Her diagnostic manner masks her involvement in the predicament she describes, even as she hints at her own knowledge of “bitter tears”. Yet “The Diver” leaves little room for doubt that Shelley is an exemplary figure of the poet for her, and she appropriates his image of disseminated words from the end of “Ode to the West Wind” when she describes the effect of “lonely power”:

Like flower-seeds, by the wild wind spread,  
 So radiant thoughts are strewed;  
 The soul whence those high gifts are shed,  
 May faint in solitude! (45-8).

Shelley wishes that the wind would “Scatter . . . my words among mankind”, where the final word, viewed from Hemans’s perspective, takes on an anachronistically gendered tone; she implies a less willed process by which “high gifts are shed”, hinting at the lot of the woman poet, even though her poem’s pronouns are masculine.

At stake for Hemans, in her mid-career turn, is the question of subjectivity’s nature and significance. In “Arabella Stuart” Hemans takes one of her two epigraphs from Byron’s *The Prophecy of Dante* – “And is not love in vain / Torture enough without a living tomb?” (III. 147-8).<sup>35</sup> Her depiction of Arabella’s mental torments, however, enters into dialogue with Shelley’s rendering of a figure dwelling in a “living tomb”, the Maniac in his *Julian and Maddalo*. The Maniac endures “a living death of agonies” (415). Indeed, Shelley’s groundbreaking evocation of such “agonies” warrants Paula R. Feldman’s praise for Heman’s “extraordinary imaginative reconstruction of the human psyche under almost unbearable stress”.<sup>36</sup> Shelley uses asterisks, Hemans mostly sections (as well as asterisks at the end of section v); but they both emphasize what Shelley, with the Maniac in mind, calls the “unconnected exclamations” (213) of their speakers’ hearts. Shelley captures a psyche audibly wounded by remembered words. He conveys distress through abrupt transitions and a syntax that twists and turns with a “tortured” expressiveness, as in the lines: “You say that I am proud – that when I speak / My lip is tortured with the wrongs which break / The spirit it expresses” (408-10). Hemans, also writing in couplets, is less visceral in her intensities than Shelley, but she is able to capture deftly in her monologue Arabella’s rapid changes of feeling, through questions, short sentences, and eloquently pointed rhyme in the lines: “Dost thou forget me, Seymour? I am prov’d / So long, so sternly! Seymour, my beloved!” (160-1). The lover’s name is repeated, but with different emphases – anxiously, then yearningly. The staccato phrasing builds on Shelley’s striking ability to enact the rhythms of somatic disturbance. If both poems brood over the fact that the need, as the Maniac has it,

“To love and be beloved with gentleness” (208), may be unrequited, both poems are troubled by the “cold world”. Julian refuses to let this world “know” (617) what Maddalo’s daughter told him about the Maniac; Arabella, reversing the Maniac’s not wholly unequivocal wish that “Oblivion” should “hide this grief” (508), requests that Seymour should “send / Ev’n then, in silent hours a thought, dear friend! / Down to my voiceless chamber” (246-8), before she proceeds to say:

for thy love

Hath been to me all gifts of earth above,  
Tho’ bought with burning tears! It is the sting  
Of death to leave that vainly-precious thing  
In this cold world! (248-52)

The command of the couplet form here has a Shelleyan attentiveness to the movement of the speaking voice, as displayed in *Julian and Maddalo*, a self-described “Conversation” (212). Hemans shapes a gap between “send” and “Down”, the delay between the words allowing the speaker to dally with the desired “thought”, before the writing captures, in “Down into my voiceless chamber”, the dark descent of any such imagined “thought” into the “voiceless chamber” of the tomb. Arabella’s “Ev’n then” appears to allude to the time “when I am with the dead!” (237). Yet the “voiceless chamber” is also her existence and, indeed, the poem which Hemans has written it, haunting us with the paradox of hearing a voice that is written. Shelley, too, suggests a speaking that is also a writing, an overhearing, an entombment of voice, an expression of feeling, a liberation of feeling, a silencing.

Thus, the Maniac wonders at his speaking and writing, almost a displaced version of that tension between “heart and art” which Wolfson discerns in the next poem in *Records of*

*Woman*, “Properzia Rossi”. In fact, Wolfson’s phrase is the “calculus of heart and art”, a term that suggests balancing, awareness, contrivance, in the face of all that resists equipoise, control, manipulation.<sup>37</sup> The monologue’s specular doublings have a Shelleyan depth. Just as Rousseau is and is not the Poet, who is and is not Shelley, in *The Triumph of Life*, so Properzia is and is not the sculptured “Forsaken Ariadne” (37) to whom she gives “my own life’s history” (36), and is and is not the Felicia Hemans, who makes her say words that seem veiled autobiography in places, yet who controls her speech, stylizing it into an externalized, shaped script. Properzia begins, less by sublimating her pain (stemming from unrequited love) into art, than by consciously performing the work of sublimation, retaining a final distance from it:

One dream of passion and of beauty more!  
 And in its bright fulfilment let me pour  
 My soul away! Let earth retain a trace  
 Of that which lit my being, though its race  
 Might have been loftier far. (1-5)

Energy leaks into loss, in the engineered enjambment at “pour / My soul away” – not simply “pour”. Hemans’s wording at this point recalls that of Shelley’s in *The Triumph of Life*. In the version Hemans would have known, that published by Mary Shelley in *Posthumous Poems* (1824), Rousseau blames his fate on the lack of “purer sentiment” (“nutriment” in modern editions) with which “the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit” had been “supplied”.<sup>38</sup> Properzia echoes yet modifies Rousseau’s apologia; she confesses that she might have achieved “loftier” successes, yet she affirms the value of that which “lit my being”, bringing a gendered inflection of longing to her expression of incomplete

“fulfilment”, to employ the word used with affecting irony at the poem’s beginning.

Hemans’s word-choice may have been influenced by Shelley’s lovers in *The Witch of Atlas* who, under the Witch’s benign and bond-relaxing influence, would “take sweet joy, / To the fulfilment of their inmost thought” (651-2). More generally, the opening of “Properzia Rossi”, like the poem as a whole, has the composure of the artist rising free of her materials, even as she immerses herself in them. Such a composure marks Hemans’s finest poetry like a signature or “trace”, to use Properzia’s term, a word that carries a Shelleyan resonance. Like Shelley, Hemans makes poetry out of the search for a palpably lost, elusive “trace / Of light diviner than the common Sun / Sheds on the common Earth” (*The Triumph of Life*, 337-8). She may have longed for Wordsworthian calm, but that very longing was more akin to Shelley’s unsatisfied quests than to Wordsworth’s “Bright healthful waves” (“To Wordsworth” 30). At the same time, she continually reworks Shelleyan pursuit into a poetry of quasi-transcendental intimation, constructing her own poetic habitation out of the “materials for imagination” available in her culture. In her elegiac “Felicia Hemans” Letitia Landon does justice to the contest between search and projection which animates the dead poet’s work, and to the fact that this contest has a Shelleyan colouring:

What on this earth could answer thy requiring,  
For earnest faith – for love, the deep and true,  
The beautiful which was thy soul’s desiring  
But only from thyself its being drew! (65-8)<sup>39</sup>

Shelley’s Sensitive Plant, which “desires what is has not, the beautiful!” (77), is one intertext co-opted by Landon; so, too, is the male poet’s confession in *Epipsychidion* that his pursuit of beauty involved questing after “The shadow of that idol of my thought” (268). Landon

honours as she articulates the nature of Hemans's poetic "desiring". As she does so, in a form that alternates feminine and masculine rhymes throughout, she pays tribute to Shelley, a poet of seemingly inexhaustible importance for herself and for Hemans.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. from *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. Susan J.

Wolfson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 526. Unless indicated otherwise, Hemans's poetry and prose is quoted from this edition, which, in such cases, is cited parenthetically, with line or page numbers, in the main text. References to other materials in the edition appear in the endnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans: With Illustrations of Her Literary Character from Her Private Correspondence*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836) 1: 296.

<sup>3</sup> Chorley 2: 194. See also Hemans viewing Liverpool from across the Mersey: "The city's voice itself / Is soft as Solitude's." *Memoir of The Life and Writings of Mrs Hemans*, By Her Sister (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840) 184. Shelley's ambitious alexandrine is broken into two lines and "as" substituted for "like."

<sup>4</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, "Hemans and the Romance of Byron," in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) 155-80 (156).

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<sup>5</sup> Diego Saglia, “‘A Deeper and Richer Music’: The Poetics of Sound and Voice in Felicia Hemans’s 1820s Poetry,” *English Literary History* 74.2 (2007): 351-70.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from *Byron: Poetic Works*, ed. Frederick Page, rev. J. Jump (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Hemans* (London: Warne, 1897) 453-34.

<sup>8</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 269.

<sup>9</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, edition used is *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003); the edition is cited parenthetically, with line or page numbers, in the main text.

<sup>10</sup> *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 3 vols. to date, gen. ed. Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat, and Nora Crook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012-), vol. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Hemans* 432.

<sup>12</sup> See Fiona Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 197.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfson, “Romance” 176. See Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 160-4. McGann notes that, in correspondence, Nanora Sweet “emphasizes both Shelley and Byron as important presences in the poem,” 160 n. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfson, “Hemans and the Romance of Byron” 175.

<sup>15</sup> See Michael O’Neill, “Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song,” *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> See *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson; and *Records of Woman, with Other Poems*, ed. Paula R. Feldman (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1999); *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Michael O’Neill and Charles Mahoney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).



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<sup>17</sup> Qtd from *Posthumous Poems 1824*, chosen with intro. Jonathan Wordsworth (Spelsbury: Woodstock, 1991) 176.

<sup>18</sup> See Julie Melnyk, "Hemans's Later Poetry: Religion and the Vatic Poet," in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry*, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk 74-91, esp. 74-77.

<sup>19</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 563-64, 564.

<sup>20</sup> See under "Shelley, Percy Bysshe" in the index to *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson.

<sup>21</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 564.

<sup>22</sup> *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2002) 66.

<sup>23</sup> For class-coded constructions of Shelley as "feminine" but not "effeminate," see Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006) 248-49.

<sup>24</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 445. See Alan Richardson, "Spiritual Converse: Hemans's *A Spirit's Return* in Dialogue with Byron and Shelley," *Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835*, ed. Beth Lau (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 123-38.

<sup>25</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 595.

<sup>26</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 595.

<sup>27</sup> See *Romantic Poetry*, ed. O'Neill and Mahoney 408n.

<sup>28</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 496, 495, 496.

<sup>29</sup> For ideological suggestions, see *Hemans*, ed. Kelly, esp. 59-60.

<sup>30</sup> "Natural and National Monuments -- Felicia Hemans's 'The Image in Lava': A Note," *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry* 212-30 (225).

<sup>31</sup> See Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 129 for relevant discussion.

<sup>32</sup> "Percy Bysshe Shelley" (1856), *Literary Studies*, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1911), 1: 111.

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<sup>33</sup> *Romantic Poetry*, ed. O'Neill and Mahoney 123.

<sup>34</sup> *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, comp. and ed. F. S. Ellis (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892).

<sup>35</sup> Epigraph traced in editions of Wu, Feldman, Wolfson, and Kelly.

<sup>36</sup> Paula R. Feldman, Introduction, *Records of Woman*, ed. Feldman, xx-xxix (xxiii).

<sup>37</sup> "'Domestic Affections' and 'the spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004) 128-66 (157).

<sup>38</sup> See *Romantic Poetry*, ed. O'Neill and Mahoney 402n.

<sup>39</sup> *Hemans*, ed. Wolfson 583.

<sup>40</sup> See Michael O'Neill, "'Beautiful but Ideal': Intertextual Relations between Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Percy Bysshe Shelley," *Fellow Romantics* 211-29.